Easter Sunday April 10, 1966

THE LIVING CHRIST; CONTRA-"GOD IS DEAD"

In the movie, "The Life of Zola", there is a remarkable court scene. Emile Zola was battling to reopen the Dreyfus affair, but his evidence was not admitted and his witnesses were not allowed to testify. Finally the judge declared that it was a closed case. As they were leaving the court-room, Zola's lawyer pointed to a mural above the judge's head. It was a painting of the Crucifixion. The lawyer said, "That, too, was once regarded as a 'Closed Case'."

Zola battled on and ultimately the closed case was reopened and Dreyfus was acquitted. I presume that, indeed, the Roman officials and the Chief Priest considered the case of one Jesus of Nazareth to be closed. To the Romans he had been nothing more than a minor nuisance - in a land where major problems were occuring daily. Actually, he had done nothing to upset them in the first place; but it had become expedient to cooperate with the Jewish High Court and execute hime. It was another matter to the officaldom of Judaism. Jesus had presented a clear threat to the authority of the priesthood - By word and deed he had not only broken the law, but publicly insulted those who devoutly kept it. And worst of all, he had the people with him. How they must have sighed in relief as he was taken down from the cross. How glad they must have been to be done with the whole messy business as his body was buried in the tomb. That they considered him a threat - even in death, however - is proven by the fact that they requested and received a cordon of Roman guards to be placed about the tomb. It was certainly - a closed case.

You know, it is almost impossible to imagine the course of history of Western civilization had it remained a closed case. It is quite impossible to think historically apart from the effect the fact of Christ's resurrection has had on that history.

And yet, in a sense, some are saying today that it was a closed case. I refer to the new school of theology which has announced the death of God. I assume that you have read about it and heard about it - in that it is today the fashionable thing to discuss, and not a newspaper or magazine worth its salt has neglected to give it coverage. This week's issue of Time asked on the cover - in bold red letters - "Is God Dead?". As I began to think about an Easter sermon this year, I intended to discuss the issue raised by these theologians in some detail. In preparation, I read everything I could get my hands on regarding the debate. I had it all outlined, documented and illustrated. And then as I sat down to put it on paper, the thought occurred to me that the whole project was irrelevant. I had just concluded a series of three worship services having to do with the last supper and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. After each service I stopped in at this building to visit briefly with those who were generously giving their own time to bring it to completion. I decided that to discuss the death of God debate with this group of worshipping, sacrificing Christians was about as relevant as addressing the Dyer Garden Club on the subject of whether or not roses really exist.

I don't know that I've ever quoted Billy Graham in a sermon before, and I don't know that I ever will again - but his response to reporters' question about his thoughts regarding the death of God debate was classic. "God couldn't be dead", he said, "I just talked to him this morning." I think he was speaking for many men who know God as a living reality in their lives; who have felt the power of God; who have been lifted up or made humble by a reality that could only be God. And so, if anyone wishes to discuss the matter in detail, I will be only too happy to do so - but not in an Easter Sermon.

The reason I mention it at all, is that it does provide a convenient entry into what I really want to say. As I understand it, the leading Death of God theologian, Thomas J. Altizer, is saying that God once existed - but no longer does. He has, in fact, died. As a transcendent being who is ever present - creating and re-creating - God does not exist. What is important about this assertion is the fact that many people act as if it were true; people who are horrified by the very idea. The well known Congregationalist minister, Chalmers Coe, has said, ("Even the most impeccable Churchmen among us behave, for all the world, as though God were non-existent, and are not so much intellectual as practical atheists.")

For many people, religious faith is totally irrelevant - the question of God has nothing whatever to do with the on-going, day by day task of living. If they believe in a God he might as well be dead because he has nothing whatever to do with their lives. Ironically, many of them would point to the Church as the source of their theological cynicism. "Look at the Church," they say with telling integrity, "and then tell me that Christianity is vital and alive. Everyone of your members has publicly confessed his faith and promised to give his whole life to Christ and his kingdom on earth. And yet only about one-third of those people can be counted on to worship regularly. They promised to give their whole lives; and in terms of real giving, it totals about $2.00 a week." "Look at the Church," they would say. "Committed to one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; and they spend more time competing with each other than they do competing with the evil in the world. Look at the Church. Committed to loving one another, and if a Negro walked into some of their sanctuaries, half the congregation would get up and leave."

If God is dead in the minds of our neighbors; if God has ceased to exist as a meaningful idea in our culture - it is the Church that must shoulder most of the blame. For it is to the Church - to you and me -

that the world looks for some hint that he does exist.

And so, we come back to the point of our own faith. Where does it begin? What does it include? What particular understandable nail does it hang on? At this point we discover that we are vulnerable; we find that many people have no faith - but only a collections of pious odds and ends that they have picked up along the way. For instance, many would find the focal point of faith in nature; and yet, besides sharing this view with millions of pagans, these persons must admit to a great deal of ambiguity. For nature provides killing hurricanes as well as soft breezes, and terrible floods as well as spring rains. Others would lodge their faith in the mystical goodness of men; but World War II, Aushwitz and Dachau leave that argument without foundation. Still others would have as their faith the ethical imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount. Religion, for them, is simply leading a good life. But, as one modern theologian has pointed out, "the tree worshippers were very moral and kind people". And as I keep discovering, some of the world's most humanitarian people are those who have discarded belief in God - and thereby know that the welfare of humanity is in man's control, not God's.

And finally, there are those whose God is a blank - a gray spot of mystery in the mind, a distant deity whom one addresses in sonorous tones; but takes none too seriously. In reality, these people are first cousins to the true atheist who has had the courage at tleast to affirm his unbelief.

Where, then, do you hang your Faith? How do you know what you think you know about God? Where is the tangible instant in time that you can point to and say, "There is my God".

The Church has always found that when the chips are down; when the logic of men has brought everthing else into doubt and question - one thing remains and that is an empty tomb. Strangely enough, it is precisely this point - this matter of resurrection that is the least understandable and logical affirmation we make. And yet, it is on this point that our religious faith rests. Take it away and there is nothing left.

Why is it so important? Consider the New Testament message without it. Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than a misguided idealist at best. At worst, he was a fraud. He tried hard; he taught about love and charity; he spoke about an eternal love that follows men through death into eternal life. But then he got into trouble with the authorities and was executed. That was it. Nice try - Jesus. Maybe someone else will do better.

Or think of what it makes the disciples. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the grave, they were the worst bunch of scoundrels in history. But is it possible to think in these terms at all without stretching our imaginations to the breaking point? Is it possible to imagine the disciples in a locked room after the terrible and frightening experience of his arrest and crucifixion - rationally plotting to go out and deceive the world? Is it possible to imagine Peter addressing them: ("Gentlemen. We've had a temporary set back. Our Lord, excuse me, the one we believed was our Lord, obviously wasn't all he thought he was. But never mind. Let's go on about our business. Let's conquer the world for him - just for the fun of it."?) Or is it possible to believe that, one by one, they all experienced the same strange halucination: and then on this basis went out to persuade the whole Roman Empire? Did they live and gladly and gloriously die for a gross lie?

You see, up to the point of Resurrection, all we have is a nice story about a good man who died for a losing cause. A martyr - no more, no less. It is the resurrection that defines our faith. It was the appearance of Jesus in the midst that convinced the disciples that he was the Lord. And it has been his real presence in the lives of men that has enabled Christianity to survive persecutions, indifference and the sheer weight of 2,000 years.

You see, it is through the door of the open tomb that we look back at the life of Jesus and have the audacity to claim that he was God incarnate. Without this - there is nothing.

As Christians, we know God; we have religious faith only through Jesus Christ. And Jesus becomes the Christ for us, because he was dead but is now alive. We are Christians because we know him, not as a dead martyr, but as a living Lord. One whose resurrected presence we experience in each other, in our personal lives, and as we gather around his table. It is not a delusion. It is for us, who know him, a reality - a fact - the most important fact in all of life.

I want to conclude by reading to you - part of an editorial that appeared last week in The Christian Century. Every now and then, one comes across something that articulates and deliniates one's own thinking. The editorial did this for me, and I hope you will find it meaningful as well. It appeared under the title, "With Glad and Grateful Hearts".

> "Most clergymen feel that as preachers they are never at their best on Easter Sunday, and for most of them, this is true. Why this - one the day in the calendar that should draw forth the preacher's finest power, the day celebrating the pivotal even in Christian tradition?"

"We can blame the hectic schedule that preceeds Easter. (an excuse I find particularly meaningful this year) But perhaps his unusual inadequacy is and index of a fact about himself and Easter.

For, however learned he may be, this day's proclamation that God raised his dead son leads everyman to depths and heights, mysteries and glories, where analysis, explanation and description falter, and men either affirm, praise and give thanks, or stand wistfully outside the Easter pageantry. These are human experiences of such intensity that they reduce the most articulate men to a groan, a sigh, a gasp. Easter is such an experience.

The Preacher who feels adequate before the ~~agnes~~ of God raising up his son deceives himself. Whatever it is at other times, preaching is - by this event, reduced and therefore elevated to proclamation. For the Easter act requires not that it be analyzed, argued, defended; but that it be announced, trumpeted, sung, proclaimed and mingled in the common greetings of men to men.

The preacher's sense of futility about his Easter sermon rises from attempts to add to what has been perfectly done in the resurrection. All that is need is that he and his people, with glad and grateful hearts, accept and proclaim the risen Christ."

Thus - my frustration at not being able to clarify what is already crystal clear; and my joy in simply being able - as your pastor - to share with you, gladly and gratefully, the truth that "He is not here; for he has risen". He is a living Christ.

Amen.